Talking About Teaching at The Ohio State University

The Never-Ending Rehearsal We Call Teaching

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Ordinarily, I would balk at the thought of someone else choosing the title for an article I am writing, but I must admit, when Joe Donnermeyer suggested this title, my article began to write itself.

You see, I am in the rehearsal business. Rehearsals occupy a mere five to ten hours in a typical week, but they are "main events" in my work at OSU. If a rehearsal goes well, I go home happy; if not, well, let's just say that my wife ... and my golden retriever ... have learned to give me extra space when I get home. Rehearsing is an art and it is my profound belief that the same is true of teaching. But I get ahead of myself ... before drawing parallels between rehearsing and teaching, let's set some parameters:

First, "rehearsal" does not mean "practice." The fastest way to distinguish between these words is to describe who is engaged in these activities, for an individual may "practice" ... that's why we call them practice rooms ... but only a group of individuals may "rehearse." To be even clearer, you *practice* to learn your part, and you *rehearse* to learn *everyone else's* part! So, **rehearsals require collaboration skills;** one might even say that the success of the rehearsal is in direct proportion to the success of the collaborative efforts of the ensemble members. Whether the ensemble is made up of dancers, musicians, actors, or jugglers, the sum can only be greater than its parts if the collaboration is there; it provides the glue, the flow, the "mojo," if you will.

Second, whether a choreographer, artistic director, or conductor, **the group leader's chief role is one of an enabler.** Creating an environment which encourages collaboration is quite a different proposition than "establishing control over a group" ... a definition of "leadership" embraced by many. In my opinion, secure leaders are willing to relinquish a little control (or even discipline) from time to time in order to enhance growth and discovery.

Third, **individual (student) involvement on a daily basis is critical to progress and accomplishment.** This is a lofty goal, indeed, especially if the group is large, but some participation from each and every member, duly noted by the leader, on each and every day is something to shoot for.

Fourth, **preparation is essential;** this goes for ordinary group members *and* leader, for it is only through preparation that goals have the chance of being realized. The idea that the professor be prepared may seem fundamental, but preparation exists on many levels; simply knowing the subject matter is a given. Some questions might be: "How well does the instructor know his students?" "Does she have the capacity to motivate her students?" "How passionate is he about teaching and learning?" "Has she organized the course in a clear and concise manner?"

Fifth, and perhaps the most critical, **communication among participants and between leader and participant must be frequent, effective, and unencumbered.** I believe in three basic tenets of communicating: 1) communication is a two-way street; 2) communication is essential to motivation ... motivation is essential to change ... and change is essential to growth; and 3) always communicating ideas in verbal terms may not be possible (or even *advisable).*

How many of these six ingredients come into play for the academician? In his book *Better Teaching, More Learning* (Phoenix: American Council on Education/Oryx Press Series on Higher Education, 1997), James Davis sheds some light on whether teaching is a science or an art.

> Some say that teaching is a science. These people stress the scientific aspects of teaching and focus on ways to systematize the communication between teacher and student. They believe that it is possible, through careful selection and pacing of materials, to regulate interactions among the student, the teacher, and materials to be learned, thus reducing the possibility that learning occurs by chance. They believe that enough is now known about how people learn to develop a technology of teaching. One of the chief advocates of a technology of teaching was B.F. Skinner. He argued that teachers can be trained to employ educational technology or to use "fool-proof materials that do the teaching.

> Others say that teaching is an art. These people believe that "scientific" teaching ends up in formalized, cookbook approaches that force students to perform and bureaucratizes learning. Besides, they argue, actual teaching involves great amounts of intuition, improvisation, and expressiveness, and effective teaching depends on high levels of creativity, sound judgment, and insight. Elliot Eisner, a professor of education at Stanford, has likened the artistic aspects of teaching to the activity of a symphony conductor. The teacher, like the conductor, draws upon a repertoire of skills and orchestrates a highly complex process. Teaching, Eisner argues, is much more like the work of the artist than the scientist. Teaching involves complex judgments that unfold during the course of instruction. Teachers must deal creatively with the unexpected. There are no fail-safe routines and prescriptions. Furthermore, the most important goals of teaching are those events that occur during the process. The outcomes are often embedded in the learning process itself.

If the claim that "teaching is an art" is true, and I must admit that I fall into this camp, then what are the artistic implications for the teacher whose academic discipline does not involve the arts, *per se*? Can all teaching be compared to a form of performance art? If so, what do teachers have in common with comedians, dancers, magicians, musicians, acrobats, and actors? Can the classroom teacher learn anything about pedagogy from the performing artist? Do performing arts require learning processes which are foreign to more academic pursuits? What are the expectations of the individual student in the classroom? in the rehearsal? What teaching techniques are used in rehearsal? What are the implications of dealing with students in a collaborative setting? How does a teacher build group dynamic? How does non-verbal communication help or hinder the teaching process?

If any of these questions stimulated a new way of thinking about your role as a teacher in the academic classroom, then this article is beginning to do what it was intended to do. Asking questions is central to the Socratic teaching method, with professor serving as more of a catalyst ... or interlocutor ... in search of answers or solutions, rather than as the authoritative resource. Unlike the authority figure, an interlocutor often has no formal position to speak on its behalf, and communications

between participants are often stimulated, enhanced and, therefore, internalized ... promoting learning through discovery rather than by rote. Or, in the words of Amos Bronson Alcott, the father of Louisa May Alcott: "The true teacher defends his pupils against his own personal influence. He inspires self-distrust. He guides their eyes from himself to the spirit that quickens him. He will have no disciple."

No matter the class size, the student who attends, anonymously signs in, says nothing, and slips out the back of the room will not learn as keenly as the one who is actively and visibly engaged in the process.

It is my premise that excellent teachers favor taking risks over seeking comfort, advocate for student self-expression rather than professorial pontification, and promote the uncertain course of discovery in place of the safer but more predictable journey of "teaching to the test." It has been said that "the inexperienced teacher sees her/himself teaching the child, while the veteran teacher sees only the child."

In September 2007, Randy Pausch, a 47-year old father of three and a very popular professor at Carnegie Mellon University, gave a final lecture to his students that has since been downloaded more than a million times on the Internet. According to Randy, "There is an academic tradition called the 'Last Lecture.' Hypothetically, if you knew you were going to die and you had one last lecture, what would you say to your students?" Well, Randy is dying. He is suffering from pancreatic cancer, which he says has returned after surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. Doctors say he has only a few months to live. "Well, for me, there's an elephant in the room. And the elephant in the room, for me, wasn't hypothetical."

As I watched this fascinating lecture by a gifted professor of computer science and design, I was struck by the similarities in his approach to teaching and what has been proven as effective in rehearsing a musical ensemble. The following discussion points illustrate these similarities:

Successful learning requires collaboration ... even improvisation. I occasionally observe teachers who "front-load" their courses; they feel that if the necessary decisions and preparations are made during the summer, for example, the course will be on "automatic pilot" for the academic term. Often, these well-intended (and often well-organized) instructors do not succeed for the simple reason that they are dealing with human beings. The process of learning is often inextricably linked to variables which are unforeseen, spontaneous, and natural... the same conditions, by the way, which often lead to real discovery and genuine learning. Randy Pausch described his attempts to encourage more collaboration among his students by creating "learning pods" for course assignments and, invariably, the students were amazed with what they learned about themselves and how they interacted with others. At the course's conclusion, members of the class reported that student-to-student exchanges were among the most meaningful moments in the class and several described these as "life-changing."

The professor's chief role is one of an enabler, or interlocutor. In music rehearsals, I am often chagrinned at how little my students listen ... really listen! As Stravinsky once pointed out: "To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also." To encourage them to be more critical listeners, I change the seating arrangement, eliminate some of the players, identify who should be the lead voice, direct their ears to higher or lower sonorities, etc. The point is, my baton makes no sound, and, until the musicians can interact in a manner more in keeping with the composer's intent, the end result will disappoint. The same could be said for the classroom, for the only course evaluation which matters is how the student applies his knowledge to life's challenges, professional or otherwise, without the professor's help. Another composer named Warren Benson said it succinctly: "There are no rehearsals, only concerts."

Preparation is essential, for both student and professor. In music, studying the score, with all its complexities and nuances, is at the heart of interpretation, for it is only after the composer's instructions are deciphered that the performer can act on those intentions. Although interpretations of the same score can vary greatly from one conductor to another, or from one orchestra to another, each performance must be grounded in the knowledge provided by the composer and the belief that the performer is the "composer's advocate." For the professor, knowing not only the subject matter, with all its complexities and nuances, but

also the parameters of the course, the sequence of instruction, the manner in which the material will be presented, the methods of evaluating the students, the organization of assignment due dates, the examination schedule, etc. is critical to her preparation. This preparation allows the professor to form an interpretation of the course material in much the same manner as the conductor; it is this interpretation that gives the course its "life" and provides the professor with his "fingerprint." But it is the *fingerprint* which changes from professor to professor, not the course content, and it is the *fingerprint* which matters most to the success of the student. If this were not true, we could hand every student the text on day one and each would do equally well on the final examination.

Individual accomplishment on a daily basis is critical to progress. No matter the class size, the student who attends, anonymously signs in, says nothing, and slips out the back of the room will not learn as keenly as the one who is actively and visibly engaged in the process. Non-verbal communication is an effective tool for the professor who wants to approve (or disapprove) of student behavior; research has shown that a well-timed smile or nod of the head has had as much impact on student attitudes as other more time-consuming verbal validations.

Communication must be frequent, effective, and unencumbered. My conducting students become fairly proficient at giving cue gestures, for example, but they often forget the most important part of the cueing process. Once the performer has responded to the conductor's gesture, there is a split second when the player wonders how s/he did. "Was that rhythmically correct?" she asks herself ... "Am I too loud?" he wonders ... "Is that short enough?" she questions. These cue responses need responses of their own ... it is a three-stage process. First the information, second the response to the information, third the response to the response. This is a powerful teaching moment, and, unfortunately, an opportunity which is too frequently overlooked.

In summary, I believe in hands-on, prove-to-me-you-understand, run-with-the-ball teaching and learning; the brilliance of the professor is meaningless to me unless some of that insight, some of that curiosity, some of that cleverness is planted in the fertile imagination of the student. In my opinion, Thomas Carruthers defined our profession properly when he claimed "A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary."

In conclusion, allow me to quote one more hero, Albert Einstein, who said:

"The point is to develop the childlike inclination for play and the childlike desire for recognition and to guide the child over to important fields for society. Such a school demands from the teacher that he be a kind of artist in his province."

"It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge."